

# Midstate Dad Speaks Out Against Radical Group He Beat In Court

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The radical Westboro Baptist Church normally demonstrates at military funerals but now they're threatening to show up at actor Heath Ledger's funeral.

That is upsetting to a Midstate father, who won a big lawsuit against the church, last year.

Al Snyder lost his son in Iraq two years ago. Westboro Baptist Church members protested at the funeral. Snyder sued the organization and won \$11 million. But because of an appeal, he hasn't seen a cent. Snyder's now giving his two cents about why the group needs to be stopped before its members harass another family.

"You never expect that you're going to have to bury a child," said Snyder. It was hard enough learning 20-year-old Matthew Snyder had died in Iraq, but what happened at his funeral, his dad calls downright hateful.

"There were signs that said 'Thank God for dead soldiers.' 'Semper Fi fag. He's in hell,' Snyder said.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside the service. "They call themselves a church, I call them occult," added Snyder.

The same group is planning another demonstration at Heath Ledger's funeral, reportedly, because of his portrayal of a homosexual man in the movie "Brokeback Mountain."

"I can't say I know what the Ledgers are going through but I know the harrassment these people are giving them." said Snyder. "Concentrate on him, don't let them get to you. Concentrate on your son."

Snyder says he doesn't understand why the words and actions of the Westboro Baptist Church are legal. "This is a hate crime. It's anything but free speech. It's harrassment."

Constitutional law experts explain why it's protected by the First Amendment. "The court is quite reluctant to get involved in restricting free speech unless there's a very clear danger to the public or an obscenity. As hurtful as the speech is, as useless as it may seem to us," said Penn State Public Policy Professor Dr. Matthew Woessner.

Snyder says the group needs to be silenced. "There's only two ways they're going to stop, and that's if the media stop giving them attention and the media's made it clear they're no going to stop that, or if you hit them where it hurts: their pocketbook."

He's already sued them, and won and not he's asking for the media's help. "Stop putting them on the air. My son died for freedom of speech. He didn't die for hate speech, said Snyder.

Snyder says he's still going through the grieving process, since he put it off for so long to fight the Westboro Baptists.

He's angry with certain media outlets because of excessive coverage and accuses some of legitimizing the radical groups' efforts. But Snyder reached out to abc27, and asked us to give him a voice. Our calls to the Westboro Baptist Church were not returned Friday.

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**1/25/08 ABC 27 News WHTM, Pennsylvania**

ANCHOR           The radical Westboro Baptist Church normally demonstrates at military funerals, but tonight they are threatening to show up at actor Heath Ledger's funeral. That is upsetting to a mid-state father who won a big lawsuit against the church just last year. Chris Seacott spoke with him tonight. Chris.

REPORTER        Well, Al Snyder lost his son in Iraq two years ago, and Westboro Baptist Church members protested at the funeral. Snyder sued the organization and won 11 million dollars. But because of an appeal he hasn't seen a cent. Tonight Snyder's giving his two cents about why the group needs to be stopped before its members harass another family.

SNYDER           ... grand parent, but you never expect that you're gonna have to bury a child.

REPORTER        It was hard enough learning 20-year-old Matthew Snyder had died in Iraq, but what happened at his funeral his dad calls down-right hateful.

SNYDER           There were signs that said "Thank God for Dead Soldiers." They said "Semper Fi Fag," "He's in Hell"; ...

REPORTER        Members of the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside the service.

SNYDER:         They call themselves a church, I call 'em a cult.

REPORTER:       The same group is planning another demonstration at Heath Ledger's funeral. Reportedly because of his portrayal of a homosexual man in the movie *Brokeback Mountain*.

SNYDER           I can't say I know what the Ledgers are going through, but I know the harassment that these people are giving

them. Concentrate on him, you know, don't - - don't let them get to you. Concentrate on your son.

REPORTER Al Snyder says he doesn't understand why the words and actions of the Westboro Baptist Church are legal.

SNYDER You know because that's what this is. It's a hate crime. This is anything but free speech. I mean, it's harassment.

REPORTER Law experts explain why it is protected by the First Amendment.

LAW EXPERT: The court's quite reluctant to get involved at restricting free speech unless there's a very clear danger to the public, or unless it's an obscenity. And in this case, as hurtful as the speech is, and as, as useless as it may seem to us ...

REPORTER Snyder says the group needs to be silenced..

SNYDER Stop putting them on the air. My son died for freedom of speech. He didn't die for hate speech.

REPORTER Now Snyder says he's a still going through the grieving processes, since he put it off so long to fight that religious group. He's angry with certain media outlets because of excessive coverage, but he's reached out to ABC 27 asking for a voice.

ANCHOR Yeah, he called us to complain, but ironically we do this story and of course they get media coverage again.

REPORTER Sure, sure and now I did try to reach out. I called the church group there, but I got no answer, got no response.

ANCHOR And they still haven't paid the 11 million dollars that they owe him?

REPORTER No, but Mr. Snyder says that a judge is looking at maybe making them pay some sort of bond money to secure some of that.

ANCHOR Maybe you could make them stop from going out and protesting. If they've got the money to protest, they must have some money they could be paying him.

REPORTER Sure, absolutely.